Chapter 36: The Last Armory — Part 3

They did not leave immediately.

Alina insisted on a second round of speaking—not about what they were letting go of now, but about what they wanted the materials to become.

“Call it a counter-spell,” she said when Korovin raised an eyebrow.

They stood at the edge of the nearest bay, watching as a former kinetic spear dissolved layer by layer.

“What would you like this to be?” Alina asked Havel.

He stared at the dissolving metal.

“A bridge,” he said finally. “In the southern passes. Every thaw season, the river floods and cuts off three villages. They still cross in rowboats. It’s dangerous. Children fall in. We’ve been petitioning for a proper crossing for twenty years.”

Alina nodded.

“Havel’s bridge,” she said. “Zarya?”

“Yes,” Zarya said.

“Is it possible to route some of the repurposed material to that project?”

“Yes,” Zarya replied. “Material allocation is flexible within safety constraints. I will mark a portion of this core for that bridge’s structural supports.”

“Good,” Alina said. “Then this spear, which could once have pierced a city, will become something that keeps children dry.”

A nearby elder cleared his throat.

“An eye,” he said.

Alina turned.

“An eye?”

The woman with the prosthetic eye tapped her temple.

“This thing is old,” she said. “The new designs are better. But they’re expensive. Too many people still live with patchwork replacements, or none at all. If these cores must become

something, let some of them become sight.”

“Zarya?” Alina asked again.

“Reallocating a fraction of nanoforge components to assistive-device cooperatives is feasible,” Zarya said. “I can coordinate with the global prosthetics network to ensure equitable distribution.”

“Done,” Alina said. “Former targeting arrays become eyes that read books.”

Korovin stepped forward.

“Storm sirens,” she said. “The good kind. The ones that actually reach everyone.”

Alina nodded without waiting for Zarya this time.

“Old command-and-control circuits become early-warning systems,” she said. “Done.”

One by one, they spoke their wishes.

“Water filters.”

“Earthquake dampers.”

“Quiet exosuits for elders who want to keep walking in the hills.”

Anastasia listened, her heart strange in her chest. It felt like something older than any of them—a sacrificial ritual, inverted. Not the offering of life to appease a violent god, but the offering of violence to serve life.

“Anastasia?” Alina asked quietly. “What about you?”

She looked at the dissolving core.

“Books,” she said. “Portable libraries. For places where the mesh still drops. For people who don’t like screens.”

“Analog?” Korovin said, half-teasing.

“Some of us like paper,” Anastasia said. “We trust things we can drop in a bathtub and still salvage.”

“Allocation possible,” Zarya said. “High-durability print units can be scaled with this material input.”

Havel shook his head slowly.

“If you had told me thirty years ago,” he said, “that I would stand in Icehold, reassigning our last weapons into eyeglasses and story-machines, I would have recommended you for psychiatric evaluation.”

“And now?” Anastasia asked.

“And now,” he said, “I recommend myself for retirement.”

Korovin snorted.

“We have a place in Denali for people like you,” she said. “They put you to work telling children cautionary tales.”

He gave her a sideways look.

“I have one condition,” he said.

“Oh?”

“When they tell those stories,” he said, “they must say that we were afraid—and that we chose differently anyway. Not that we suddenly became brave.”

“Agreed,” Anastasia said instantly. “The Way of the Living has no use for legends of effortless courage.”

“Good,” Havel said. “Then let them put that on a plaque.”